

Senegal

Facts and Statistics

Location: Western Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania

Capital: Dakar

Population: 12,521,851 (July 2007 est.)

Ethnic Groups: Wolof 43.3%, Pular 23.8%, Serer 14.7%, Jola 3.7%, Mandinka 3%, Soninke 1.1%, European and Lebanese 1%, other 9.4%

Religions: Muslim 94%, Christian 5% (mostly Roman Catholic), indigenous beliefs 1%

Language

French is the official language, but really only used regularly by a minority of Senegalese who were educated in colonial-style schools of French origin. Most people speak their own ethnic language. Three-quarters of the population speak the Wolof language, thereby making it the lingua franca of the country. There are actually five other major languages: Serer, Alpuular, Mandingo, Diola, and Bassari. Senegalese languages are primarily oral rather than written, although younger Senegalese can often write in their native language using a modified form of the Latin alphabet. However, Muslims may use the Arabic alphabet to write in their native language.

Wolof is also spoken in Gambia and Mauritania and is the native language of the ethnic group of the Wolof people. Like the neighboring language Fula, it belongs to the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Wolof dialects may vary between countries (Senegal and the Gambia) and the rural and urban areas. "Dakar-Wolof", for instance, is an urban mixture of Wolof, French, Arabic, and even a little English spoken in Dakar, the capital of Senegal.

Senegalese Society & Culture

Tribal and Ethnic Diversity

Although there are over ten ethnic groups in Senegal, five are predominant. The largest group is the Wolof who cluster in the northwest and centre of the country. The Hal Pularen group reside along the middle valley of the Senegal River, the upper valley of the Casamance River, and in the centre. The Joola live mainly in the lower Casamance valley. The Manding live in the middle Casamance valley. There is a small Lebanese minority who are generally merchants.

The vast majority of the population is Muslim, with small minorities following animist beliefs or Roman Catholicism or other Christian faiths. Many combine a formal religion with animist beliefs, practices, and ceremonies.

Religion

Religion plays a pivotal role in the Senegalese culture. Most people are religious in their own way and can sometimes be suspicious of people who do not practice any religion.

Freedom of religion is enshrined in the constitution. Senegal is therefore open to various religions and the various religious groups coexist in relative harmony. Although the majority of the population are Muslims, they often incorporate animist beliefs and practices into their religious practices as do the Christian minorities. Interfaith marriage is common as is the practice of having different members of the family following different faiths.

Animism

Animism is based on the belief that natural objects and idols or fetishes have magical power. Many Senegalese, whatever their religious adherence, to some extent believe in supernatural forces and that certain people, primarily doctors, herbalists, diviners, or marabouts (religious figures) have the power to utilize these forces. It is common to see people wearing amulets (called "gris-gris") around their waist, neck, arms, or legs.

People consult with diviners or marabouts to protect themselves against evil spirits, to improve their financial status or bring them love, to cure chronic illnesses, to settle disputes, or to place a curse on another person.